

*Working Communities Challenge*

**Summary for Committee:**

The Vermont Working Communities Challenge advances local collaborative efforts that build strong, healthy economies and communities in rural areas of Vermont. This initiative was launched in 2019 by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston (FRBB). The WCC is made up of local teams of leaders that are tackling complex challenges facing communities throughout the state. These teams are supported by a Vermont business or municipality. This is a three-year program.

<https://www.vtrural.org/working-communities>

**Teams:**

- **Greater Barre:** Lower the rate of single female head of households in poverty by 15% in 10 years. [Backbone: [Green Mtn United Way](#)]
- **Lamoille:** Build sustainable systems of collaboration to reduce systemic barriers to employment. [Backbone: [United Way of Lamoille County](#)]
- **Springfield Area:** Increase workforce participation in the Springfield region by creating a sustainable, collaborative workforce development pipeline to focus on recruitment and retention. [Backbone: [Springfield RDC](#)]
- **Winooski:** Ensure that the people making community decisions accurately reflect the demographics of our community by bringing new voices to the table throughout decision-making. [Backbone: [City of Winooski](#)]
- **Northwest VT:** Attract and retain talent by addressing regional housing challenges. [Backbone: [Northwest RPC](#)]
- **Northeast Kingdom:** Reduce intergenerational poverty through hubs of financial stability. [Backbone: [NEK Collaborative](#)]
- **Southern Vermont:** Attract and retain a new workforce through building a diverse, welcoming community. [Backbone: [Brattleboro Development Credit Corp](#)]

<https://www.vtrural.org/working-communities/teams>

The Senate Economic Development Committee heard testimony from four individuals, two who work for The Vermont Council on Rural Development, who is the neutral facilitator of the program in Vermont contracted by the FRBB, and two who are working on teams in White River Valley and the Greater Barre Area.

Jessica Savage, Director of Community Collaboration from the Vermont Council on Rural Development spoke about the WCC program and how its rooted in systems change, with varying goals for each team in each area of the state. Ms. Savage spoke about how the program is mainly focused on brining housing, workforce, and business to Vermont.

Brian Low, the Executive Director spoke to the nature of the program as a convening effort, that is forging new networks and relationships, and working to build capacity. Mr. Lowe

emphasized that this is not itself a new organization, but rather teams of local individuals who are looking at an addressing local issues, whose data may become valuable to the legislature.

Elaine Toohey is the project director of the Greater Barre Area WCC who are looking at reducing the rate of single female head of household in poverty by 15% in the next 10 years. The Working Bridges program aims to increase economic mobility and overall stability of women-led households in the Greater-Barre Area during a 6-month work plan. The committee raised an equity issue of this program around the potential for a male individual in a similar position, with children, etc. Sen. Clarkson also raised a question about the difference between this program and the services provided by a state dept. such as the DOL. Elaine answered by saying that this program is holistic and targeted to the individual and works with the employer.

<https://gmunitedway.org/working-bridges-resource-coordinator/>

Sarah Danly spoke is the project manager White River Valley Consortium WCC and her team is working on increasing the availability of housing that is affordable for entry-level workers and beginning entrepreneurs, as well as developing an identity for the White River Valley region. This project is supported by many core businesses in this area. This work is being done by supporting local housing committees by sharing resources and collecting data on housing.

<https://vitalcommunities.org/white-river-valley-consortium/>

The witnesses didn't have a specific ask of the committee during this meeting but wish to keep an open line of communication as data from this program may become valuable to the legislature.

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### **Notes from meeting:**

#### **Jessica Savage, Director of Community Collaboration, Vermont Council on Rural Development**

##### **Independent non-profit**

- Working Communities Challenge
- Communities that want to collaborate
- Initiative is about systems change
- State has invested heavily, allowing teams to go from 4 to 8
- **Vermont Steering Committee, comprised on Vermont businesses**
  - **62% of Vermont Towns involved**
  - **51% of Vermont population is involved**
- Communities working together to bring housing, workforce, and business to Vermont
- Teams: large groups of people from various towns?
- What makes WCC Different
  - Long-term systems change solutions developed in partnership with people in lived experience
  - Solutions to problems are created with a learning agenda by providing patient and flexible capital for experimentation

- WCC Approach
  - Shared goal of inclusive economic outcomes through community driven economic development systems changes
- Sen. Brock brought up a lack of representation in these organizations that are looking to serve the same group of communities and individuals (Land access and opportunity board)
  - “So many things in an uncoordinated way”
  - **Not creating a new organization, giving communities the capacity to collaborate**
  - “WCC as economic justice”
- Sen. Clarkson: Are there a set of standards for all 8 teams? What are the measures for success?
  - **Set goals, each team has their own set of measures**
  - **How best to adapt a more standardized approach while maintaining flexibility**

**Elaine I. Toohey, Project Director, Greater Barre Area Working Communities Challenge**

**Working Bridges Program**

Issues of equality in who is offered this program, pilot is focused on women. Committee brought up equity issues of male parents who might have hungry children.



**Sarah Danly, Project Manager, White River Valley Consortium Working Communities Challenge**

The White River Valley Consortium

- Goals:
  - Increase the availability of housing that is affordable for entry-level workforce and beginning entrepreneurs
  - Develop a regional identity
  - White River Valley region

**Brian Lowe, Executive Director, Vermont Council on Rural Development**

- Convening effort
- New networks and relationships
- Looking at ways to build capacity
- Locally identified challenges
- Not itself a new organization\*
- What are these teams finding that may be valuable to the legislature in policy changes/adjustments
- VCRD website